

Introducing Twenty-nine Pioneers in Greek America

By Eva Catafygiotu Topping

Diaspora is a Greek word. Appearing first in Plutarch, the ancient biographer and philosopher, it has been in use for almost two millennia. Greek experience of being dispersed all over the world is, however, even older than the world itself. Its history goes back to the colonies settled by Greeks around the shores of the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

In the written records of this long diaspora, women are seldom, if ever, mentioned. For example, the founders of our 500 Greek American communities are routinely eulogized as "our fathers and grandfathers." Our founding "mothers and grandmothers" are generally ignored. It is as if they never existed. Yet women have been around everywhere since that fateful day in Eden.

Like all other women, the Greek daughters of Eve remain a blur, forgotten and nameless. For this reason, I was delighted to find the names of 29 women in the book of Seraphim G.



Anastasia Makris Topitzes, the author's mother-in-law, in front of her grocery store, in the early 1940s

Charlestown. Unlike most of the restaurants, hers was located far from the center of town, in South Boston.

A short distance from Boston, 3,000 Greeks had settled in Peabody and historic Salem, forming a single community. Two thousand of them worked in shoe factories and tanneries. In Peabody there were 55 Greek-owned businesses, including nine coffee houses. Under Barbers are given the names of seven men and one woman, Karolides, Mary, 162 Main. However, Coseas, Odysseas is also a barber at the same address. Hence it is not easy to determine Mary's position in the establishment. Who owns the shop, and what is the personal relationship of these two barbers? Greek or not, women barbers were certainly unusual in 1920. Herein may lie an interesting story.

In Springfield, west of Boston, lived 2,000 Greeks. They had a new church and owned 150 businesses. There was only one dressmaker in that community, Andreopoulos, Paraskevi, 195 Chestnut. Seven retail groceries belonged to Greeks, one of whom is Panagiotopoulos, Simon, Mrs. 383 Church Rd.

delighted to find the names of 29 women in the book of Seraphim G. Canoutas, *United States and Canada: Greek Business Directory, 1921-1922*. Assuming that they were at least 20 years of age at the time this book was written, they have by now slipped into the next world and well-learned rest. According to a Chinese proverb, "Women hold up half the sky." If our Greek "founding mothers" are erased from the record, we will unfortunately know just half of our history.

None of these 29 women is famous. I recognized one name, that of my own mother-in-law. Like her, most of them were married women. Canoutas identifies some women as "Mrs.," others as "Miss." In the case of a number of them (including my mother-in-law), there is no indication of their marital status.

They lived in 11 Greek communities, scattered from sea to sea, across the country from Massachusetts to California. No matter where fate had brought them in this vast land, these pioneer Greek women found themselves among "alien corn," a long way from home. In this fascinating Greek business directory they are listed under the following categories: Dressmakers, Midwives, Beauty Parlors, Grocers (Retail), Restaurants, Barbers, Clothing, and Bakers.

In the early 1920s, New York City had the largest Greek community in the country. Numbering 30,000 souls, it had four churches, 50 coffeehouses, over 3,000 Greek-owned *katastemata* (businesses), two papers and more than a hundred organizations, including a women's society, the Philoptochos Adelphotes Kyrion. In the 30 pages devoted to listing businesses in Greek hands, the names of 11 women appear.

Under the heading Dressmakers, Kakaranga, Mrs., 1497 So. Blvd. is listed. (I cite each entry as given in Canoutas). She is, however, not the only Greek dressmaker in New York. Under

in the early 1940s

Miscellaneous, we find two more: Sigala, Irene, Modiste, 310 W. 25th and Sarapoulos, Miss, 214 W. 103rd. "Modiste" is the French word for dressmaker, whence the Greek word *modistra*. Under this same catch-all category is found Cleopatra Hand Embr., 203 W. 34th. Whether or not Cleopatra was the given name of this embroiderer, she was capitalizing on traditional women's work. (Although my mother did not teach me to cook or sew, she taught me how to embroider!) Women embroiderers, working under who-knows-what conditions, produced merchandise for the eight stores which sold embroideries for the trousseaus and homes of Greek women.

Of the two beauty parlors owned by Greeks, one belonged to Xanthaky,

tioners of an ancient female profession surely comforted Greek immigrant women and eased the pains of giving birth.

Farther north in Buffalo, the Greek community consisted of 1,500 persons. They had a church and five *kaffeneia*. One hundred fifty businesses were in Greek hands. Fifty-six owners of businesses are listed under the broad category of Conf., Newspapers, Cig. and Tob. It includes one enterprising woman, Machairas, Mary, Mrs., 315 Main. There is no further information about her. Did she sell papers, cigars, and tobacco? Or did Mrs. Machairas dispense homemade sweets and ice cream in her confectionery, one of Buffalo's *oraia zacharoplasteia* alluded to by Canoutas?

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Mme., 1367 Clay Av. One wonders why she alone of our 29 women is called "Madame." It sounds pretentious.

Given the size of the New York community, and the fact that at that time babies were born at home not in a hospital, it is cheering to find the names of seven women under Midwives. They are: Balopoulou, Mrs. Irene, 164 E. 33rd; Courcoulis, Mrs. D., 350 W. 56th; Markatos, Mrs. O., 81 Madison; Pascalides, Mrs. H., 422 W. 70th, and Vlahos, Mrs. Mary 2221 W. 65th. The presence and skills of these seven prac-

Industrialized Massachusetts, though cold and forbidding, had from the early years of this century attracted Greek immigrants. Thousands of men found work in its mills and factories, as did many women as well. Four of our 29 heroines, however, found other work.

At the beginning of the 1920s, 5,000 Greeks lived in Boston, the "city of the bean and the cod." They had a church, and owned 600 businesses of "all kinds." These included around 200 restaurants. One of these belonged to Coutlos, Erere, 290 Medford,

ranagiotopoulos, Church, Chicopee Rd.

Like Massachusetts, the neighboring state of New Hampshire attracted large numbers of Greek immigrants to work in factories. By 1920, 6,000 Greeks (including my maternal grandparents) had settled in Manchester. Five thousand of them worked in the local shoe factories and cotton mills. They had two churches, 22 *kaffeneia*, and owned 150 businesses. Spruce Street was the center of a vibrant large "Greek Town." Two midwives, Pachouti, A. and Vamos, E., both lived at 72 Spruce, probably in one of those tenement houses of several stories. Two dressmakers, Spiratou, G. and Menoudi, C., lived at 136 and 85 Spruce respectively.

Not far from Manchester, 3,000 Greeks lived in Nashua. In this industrial city, 1,500 of them worked as laborers. Greeks owned 70 businesses, many of which were located on West Pearl Street. Four establishments are listed under Clothing, including that of Tsiantos, Mrs. Vaia, 173 W. Pearl. Across the street from her at 172 W. Pearl was a competitor, Nick Caros @ Co. And next to him at 174 was the retail grocer, Tsiantos, George. The proximity of the Tsiantos clothing store and grocery may suggest an entrepreneurial immigrant couple eager to get ahead.

Moving to the Midwest, in Cincinnati, Ohio the Greek community numbered around 600. They had established a church in 1907 and owned 80 businesses. No less than 30 confectioneries were in Greek hands. Located at the same address, one of these still produces the best hand-dipped chocolates to be found in Cincinnati. Under Restaurants we find among the 12 names that of Machairas, Mrs. Theopullo, 230 Central Av. On the same street were located three other Greek-owned restaurants and several confectioneries.

From John Moraites's recent history of the Cincinnati Greek community I

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learned a few facts about Mrs. Machairas's history. She thus becomes a person with her own identity, more than a name in a business directory. She was one of the first Greek women in Cincinnati. Her first name was Theoni (not Theopullo as given in Canoutas). A native of Dardanellion in Asia Minor, she immigrated with her husband John and four children to this city on the Ohio River. There he established one of the earliest coffeehouses. After John Machairas's death, November 27, 1918,

Stella, Mrs., 1720 Avondale Av.

Farther to the west, by the early 1920s, 4,000 Greeks lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Two thousand of them were employed in the city's foundries, tanneries, and shoe factories. In 1904, the Church of the Annunciation was organized. The Greeks of Milwaukee then owned 130 businesses, "the usual," Canoutas remarked. Under Bakers appear three names. One of these, Topitze, Anest, 369 Nat. Av., is that of my mother-in-law, Anastasia Makris

No respectable woman ever crossed the threshold of a coffeehouse, the holy of holies for Greek males. Yet, Mrs. Machairas, a widow alone in a foreign country, presided over a coffeehouse.

Theoni continued to run the *kaffeion* to support herself and her four children. With the example of Theoni Machairas in mind, we may assume that she was not the only courageous widow forced by necessity to take over her husband's business in those early difficult years.

It was a coffeehouse, not a restaurant that Theoni ran. And I wonder what effect the black-clad presence of the widow-owner had on this traditionally all-male space. Running a Greek *kaffeion* was not, of course, like running a

Topitzes. She appears a second time in the list of 12 grocers -- Topitzis, Anest, 369 National Av. My husband was rather surprised to find his mother's name rather than his father's in Canoutas's business directory.

Thanks to her youngest daughter and her third son (my husband), I know the story of this pioneering Greek immigrant woman. She was born around 1881/1882, and raised in Mavrades, a small Gortynian hamlet located at the bottom of a deep ravine. Toward the end of 1902, she married Vasileios Topitzes from the village of Vitis, Thessaly.



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Maria Gracia Turnbull

grocery, bakery, or confectionery. No respectable woman ever crossed the threshold of a coffeehouse, the holy of holies for Greek males. Yet, Mrs. Machairas, a widow alone in a foreign country, presided over a coffeehouse. In Greece this never would have happened. But in the new world, Greek immigrant women found themselves working outside the home, doing new things. The Widow Machairas in Cincinnati is a striking example of change. To move from home to coffeehouse was to transcend age-old boundaries.

Toledo, in northern Ohio, had a Greek community larger than Cincinnati's. In this town lived about 2,000 Greeks, of whom 500 worked in factories and on railroad lines. They had a church and owned 135 *katastemata* (stores). These included eight retail groceries. One of them belonged to Maras,

1881/1882, and raised in Mavraes, a small Gortynian hamlet located at the bottom of a deep ravine. Toward the end of 1902, she married Vasileios Topitzes from the village of Vizitsi. The newlyweds then set out on the long journey to Milwaukee. They arrived there early in 1903.

Anastasia was pregnant. She is the first Greek woman to come to that large, cold industrial Midwestern city. The Greek colony at that time consisted of about 400 Greek bachelors.

In August 1903, Anastasia gave birth to a son, the first of her 11 children. He was also the first child of Greek immigrants to be born in Wisconsin. One can hardly imagine her loneliness and sense of loss. There was no Greek midwife to deliver her baby, no Greek woman to speak words of comfort and advice to the new young mother.

Anastasia's husband soon found work in a tannery. And after a few years, he opened a grocery and bakery. Vasileios (in time he became William) owned the grocery and bakery. But his wife was involved with the business. Despite the birth of 11 children (nine of whom survived), she worked long hours in the grocery, every day of every week, year after year. The person who was canvassing Greek businesses in Milwaukee around 1920 found her alone in the grocery (the bakery was behind the grocery). She was obviously in charge. So he put her name under Bakers and Grocers instead of her husband's. It's a piece of immortality she richly deserves.

That Anastasia Makris Topitzis was able to work as a grocer is something of a miracle. For, like too many Greek women of her generation, she could neither read nor write. She learned little English. Yet she waited on customers, giving them what they wanted. When a customer asked for a box of Oxydol, she gave the right thing, not because she could read the letters, but because she knew what the box looked like. (Those were the days before self-service.) Somehow she also managed to calculate

correctly to make change and to use the cash register.

She died in 1947. Four American-born generations, her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren now honor the memory of this Greek immigrant founding mother. It is high time to recognize the importance of women like Anastasia Makris Topitzis in the early history of Greek America. They are profiles in courage.

Like others before and after them, Greek immigrants crossed the continent to California, in search of opportunity and a better life. By 1920, Greeks had settled in many large and small towns up and down the length of the Golden State. San Francisco had by far the largest Greek community. It consisted of 8,000 souls. One thousand businesses were

Greek-owned, among them 83 retail groceries. In this long list of grocers, we find Loufakis, Marie, Mrs., 141 3rd, the fourth Greek woman who we know was selling groceries more than 80 years ago. There were surely others, those who did not make it into Canoutas's business directory of 1921-1922.

In the 233 pages of long lists of Greek businesses and business owners, the names of women are conspicuously rare. Unless you are looking for them, they are hard to find. The 29 women whom I discovered, the grocers and midwives, restaurateurs and confectioners, embroiderers and dressmakers, a barber and *kaffeion* owner, they made my search worthwhile.

This is an introduction. Name, address and occupation are not enough. I wish I knew more about all of them

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